

Scriptural Tradition and Personal Experience in the Buddhist Tradition

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The best Pali word in Buddhist usage which embraces the whole of what is implied by the phrase Buddhist Tradition above is *Sāsana*. It literally means the message, or the instructions of a particular teacher, school or institution [from the Pali root *sās* > *sāsati* = instructs]. The best example of this usage is *Etam Buddhāna sāsanaṃ* [Dhp. v.183] which in English would read as 'This is the message of the Buddhas'. The complete text of that message runs as: Abstain from all that is unwholesome. Acquire what is conducive to one's spiritual growth. Cleanse and safeguard the purity of one's mind or one's inner self [*Sabba-pāpassa akaraṇaṃ Kusalassa upasampadā Sacitta-pariyodapanaṃ Etam Buddhāna sāsanaṃ*. Dhp. v. 183].

This *sāsana* or the Buddhist tradition in which we are interested at the moment, is also viewed under three subheadings as 1. Scriptural tradition or textual learning [*pariyatti sāsana*], 2. Practical or living tradition [*paṭipatti sāsana*] and 3. Personal experience or experiential tradition [*paṭivedha sāsana*]. The suggested theme of the paper as given to us seems to take adequate notice of items 1 and 3 of our threefold Buddhist tradition. It seems to move with ease from 1 to 3, with no special attention paid to item 2. It is this item No. 2. called *paṭipatti* or the phase which concerns itself with each person developing his or her own religious culture which gives Buddhism its special characteristic of being called a 'way of life'.

It is for this same reason of being viewed as a 'way of life' that Buddhism has at times come to be thoughtlessly stigmatized as not being eligible to be called a religion. In Buddhism, the closeness to the faith or creed, by mere avowal of allegiance [*bhakti* or *sraddhā*], does not bring the adherent to the realization of its

goal. But *sraddhā* [Pali *saddhā*] is basic to us to the extent that it contributes to the primary spiritual leap forward in Buddhism [*sampakkhandana-lakkhaṇā saddhā*]. It does attune to some extent the adherent to the Buddhist way and he does thereby reap the reward of a happier life [*Yesam mayi saddhā mattam pemamattam sabbe te saggaparāyanā ' ti. M.I.142*]. But in terms of the final goal, this is definitely regarded as being only peripheral.

The concept of scriptural tradition within the Buddhist religious framework would invariably include everything that starts, on the one hand, with the first utterance of the Buddha Gotama on his attainment of enlightenment [f.n.1] and end up with what he said on his death-bed, after forty-five years of teaching and preaching, as his last injunction or parting words to the disciples who had gathered around him. [f.n. 2]

On the other, the scriptural tradition would also include many things that grew around what the Buddha said, by way of conformist explanations and interpretations of his near disciples. Within this are contained what were once only orally transmitted, from generation to generation, i.e. from teacher to pupil and from fellow-monk to fellow-monk. We must not fail to note here that, with a remarkable system of built-in verification, this process was carried out with near-perfect-accuracy. Within our own Buddhist tradition, we call this learning *pariyatti* [Skt. *pariyāpti*], and it includes a vast body of literature [known by various names as *Tripiṭaka*, *Navariga-satthu-sāsana* etc.].

Buddha's own teachings about facts of life, i.e. the reality of the world or more precisely the real nature of the world [*yathā-bhūta-ñāṇa* or *yathābhuccā*], and transcendence to a plane beyond it, together with supporting and corroborating expressions of more or less contemporary disciples, form what we call the Canonical scriptures [*Pāli* as against *Attha-kathā* or Commentary]. This is the core of our scriptural tradition. What comes after this, either as continuation of a growing religious tradition, or as explanation and interpretation of the former, is accurately designated either as non-canonical or as post-canonical. A greater part of what we call the commentaries today belong to this category. From

ancient times, Buddhist scholarship, specially of the monastic groups, has distinguished and differentiated these two strata and given them their relative assessments.

Within the corpus of Buddhist spiritual growth, we are equally conscious of what is referred to above as personal experience. As goal-oriented disciples of the Buddha's day endeavour and struggle for the attainment of their spiritual goals, they reveal to us, in works like the Sutta Nipāta and the Thera and Therīgāthā, various facets of their religious experience. They constitute at times the aspirations of the monks and nuns and at others their achievements and attainments, marking various stages on their track. They reflect the natural and spontaneous personalized growth out of the scriptural tradition, like an oak out of an acorn. Most disciples, both men and women, wax eloquent on the success of their spiritual endeavours. Others like Thera Tālapuṭa [Theragāthā vv. 1091-1145] and Theri Paṭācārā [Therīgāthā vv. 112 ff. 117 ff. 127 ff.], indicate to us with an astonishing sense of sincerity, their spiritual aspirations. An encounter with the personal experience of these men and women, as mortals reaching out for something beyond, as supramundane and transcendental, is bound to be one of absorbing interest.

Let us get back again to the subject of scriptural tradition. The Scriptures in Buddhism is clearly understood to have a down to earth origin. They have their genesis with the Buddha. He discovered it himself, after a great deal of strenuous search [*Kicchena me adhigataṃ*]. It would be best for us to meet the Buddha at down to earth level, as Master and pupils, and seek his guidance as to what criteria we should adopt in venerating a tradition of such a distant past and as to wherein we should lay our final trust. The Buddha is indeed very clear and precise on this subject. He in fact anticipates centuries of possible changes, i.e. possible deviations and deflections, within a scholastic tradition and seems to forewarn us about possible abuses. He obviously delivers to us a self-operative system of error detection and a method of verification for authenticity, reducing to a minimum the errors and abuses of the personal factor in the handling of the

scriptures.

These criteria are declared by the Buddha himself, during the last days of his life, in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta or the Book of the Great Decease [DN.II.123 ff.]. These are referred to under the Four Great References or *Mahāpadesā*. They are: 1. A monk would declare that he has derived his knowledge of the Dhamma and the Vinaya from the Buddha himself. 2. Another would assert that he has received it from the senior members of the monastic community. 3. A third would claim to have had it from several erudite monks of a particular institution. 4. Finally, a fourth one would say he received it from a particular monk of a specific monastic institution.

In all cases, the advice of the Buddha is that one should neither accept nor reject them on their face value [*na abhinanditabbaṃ na paṭikkositabbaṃ*. *ibid.*]. They should be tested in relation to what has been preserved as Sutta and Vinaya [*Sutte otāretabbāni Vinaye sandassetabbāni*. *ibid.*]. This respect for the word as laid down, not only by the Buddha himself, but also for what has been approved and authenticated under his authority, seems to have always been at a premium in the history of the Buddhist community. It is well worth taking a close look at the remarks with which the Buddha totally endorses the dhamma explanations of a Buddhist nun of his day, as recorded in the Cūlavedalla Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya [at MN.I.304f. The translation is mine own.]. " Wise indeed O Visākha, is Nun Dhammadinnā. She is greatly learned. If you had asked from me this same question, I myself would have answered you as Nun Dhammadinnā has done. Its meaning is precisely as she has expressed to you. You should bear it in mind exactly as it has been delivered."

Thus it becomes clear that in Buddhism the scriptural tradition comes to hold a position *par excellence*. It includes the totality of what the Master had laid down as the Dhamma and the Vinaya, i.e. all of his teachings about man and his liberation as well as the entire regulatory process which regulates and directs the life of the disciple. The Buddha in fact forewarns his disciples not to despair on his death about the loss of the Master. The Dhamma he has preached and the

Vinaya he has laid down are declared to step in to fill this vacancy [*Yo vo ānanda mayā dhammo ca vinayo ca desito paññatto so vo mamaccayena satthā.*

DN.II.154]. Elsewhere he has declared that he who sees the Dhamma sees the Master and he who sees the Master sees the Dhamma [*Yo kho Vakkhali dhammaṃ passati so maṃ passati yo maṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati.* SN.III.120]

The all-embracing teachings of the Four Noble Truths [*cattāri ariya-saccāni*] provide, on the one hand, the entire theoretical basis of Buddhism as a religion. The first truth, i.e. No. 1 of *Dukkha* teaches us all about the unsatisfactoriness of the human predicament. As a truth, it is not to remain a mere theory apart from us. We are required to relate this to our lives and see its reality within us. Two very vital terms in relation to this *dukkha* are *pariññeyyaṃ* [= should be known] and *pariññātaṃ* [= has come to be known]. So it is with No. 2 of *Samudaya* or genesis of *Dukkha* which is identified as Craving or *taṇhā*. Conceptually it is to be grasped as one that needs to be eliminated and we are required to continue striving towards its elimination in our process of living. No. 3 is *Nirodha* [i.e. Nirvana] which must be our main target of achievement. These need first to be conceptually grasped as truths or *sacca* and then need to be integrated into and realized in our living process. These two stages are referred to as *kicca* [has to be done] and *kata* [has been done].

It is the truth No. 4 of *Magga* or the Noble Eight-fold Path [NEP] which clearly stands out as the major practical component of Buddhism. Of this it is said ' the Path is to be developed ' [*maggo bhāvetabbo*]. It is here that the concept of the practical or living tradition of *Paṭipatti sāsana* [item No. 2 of the three fold *sāsana* referred to above], comes to play its major role in Buddhism. The dynamics of religion in Buddhism are seen at work here through a greater part of the Noble Eight fold Path [*Ariyo Aṭṭhaṅgiko Maggo*]. We conceive of this way as an upward-leading ladder which conveys worldlings from the down-to-earth mortal plane of the ordinary humans to transcendental heights culminating in Nirvana.

The NEP [*Magga*] itself appears to embody all three levels of the *sāsana*:1.

the Scriptural leading to the acquisition of the requisite knowledge [through corrected vision or *sammā-dit̥thi* = No.1 of NEP]. 2. the Practical with its embodiment into one's life of qualities of Nibbanic alignment. This is essentially a purificatory developmental process of humans ridding themselves of their samsara-binding involvement and entanglement in their activities of day to day living [Nos. 2,3,4,5 & 6 of NEP]. 3. the Experiential level during which the adherent to the Buddhist way of life gradually acquires a vision and an awareness which, by its very nature, brings about a healthy withdrawal [*virāga*] from the mundane plane. [Nos. 6,7 & 8 of NEP operate in varying degrees in both categories of Practical as well as Experiential]. It must be appreciated that all these are mutually interrelated than individually exclusive.

This single entry point into Buddhism of corrected vision of the Noble Eight fold Path [*sammā-dit̥thi* = NEP No.1] seems to throw open the doors to the entire scriptural tradition of Buddhism. The Buddhist texts say that one acquires it through listening to a competent teacher [*parato ghoso*]. How much or how little one makes use of this as a pre-requisite is a variable position, dependent on the spiritual sharpness or otherwise of the individual, man or woman. One is immediately let into the Buddhist way of life thereafter, starting with item No.2 of the Path, namely 'restructured thinking' or *sammā-saṅkappa* [NEP No.2]. *Saṅkappa* literally means 'patterns of thinking'. A Buddhist has to reset his patterns of thinking, 'to be in conformity with his or her spiritual aspirations'. They have necessarily to be the outcome of what was described earlier as 'corrected vision' or *sammā-dit̥thi* which heads [*pubbarigama*] the Noble Eight fold Path [NEP No.1] or the Buddhist path to liberation.

In Buddhism, 'restructured thinking' which is generated under the powerful direction of the scriptural tradition of corrected vision invariably becomes both a substantial and a dynamic component of personal experience. It generates within the humans a willingness to freely give up or renounce [*nekkhama*]. Two others immediately join it: absence of hostility [*a-vyāpāda*] and non-violence [*a-vihimsā*]. In an ultimate analysis it would be discovered that all these virtues are precursors

both to the reduction and the elimination of the baneful component of selfhood or egotism [*sakkāya-diṭṭh*] which binds the humans to the painful process of existence.

Personal experience, it must also be noted, has in Buddhism two distinct phases. Buddhist thinking classifies these as belonging to the two grades of the 'learner' [*sekho*] and to the 'accomplished' or 'he who is no more a learner' [*asekho*]. The first is only an aspirant but one who is already enrolled, i.e. one who is already a stream winner or *sotāpanna*. The second is one who has achieved, i.e. reached his spiritual goal. With the two preparatory stages of vision and thinking accomplished [NEP Nos. 1 & 2], the Eight fold Way takes the Buddhist aspirant through his correctly guided life process of correct speech [NEP No. 3 = *sammā vācā*], correct activities [NEP No.4 = *sammā kammanto*] and correct livelihood [NEP No.5 = *sammā ājīvo*].

In all these three, the transition from incorrect to correct forms is undeniably personal experience of great worth. They imply, no doubt, wholesome physical activities at the mundane level [*sammā vācā sammā kammanto sammā ājīvo*]. But beyond this point, on reaching correct striving [NEP No. 6 = *sammā vāyāmo*], the aspirant is more or less off the physical plane of mundane living. He seems to focus attention on the working of his inner self, to eliminate evil and cultivate virtue. He detects and rids his mind of five mind-failings referred to as *pañca-nīvaraṇa*. [f.n. 3] At correct mindfulness [NEP No.7 = *sammā satī*], while he still lives in the world, his concerns seem to be directed and geared to a plane beyond this. His primary need seems to be mind culture [NEP No. 8 = *sammā samādh*].

Coming closely in the wake of his moral purification and spiritual build up, he confidently feels an elevation of his mind to lighter and more bouyant states. Starting with a fulfilling sense of gladness or *pāmojja*, the disciple gets to a further state of joy which is termed *pīti*. This is duly followed by ease or comfort of body and mind and is called *sukha*. As he gains a more realistic view of his own physical body [*kāye kāyānupass*], based on a more philosophical analysis, he

transfers himself to the planes of cognitive awareness and their more subtle analyses. Finally, at correct harnessing of mind [NEP No. 8 = *sammā samādhī*], the adherent has already completed his journeying through the meditative stages called the *jhānas*. At this stage his mind is described as being ready to be harnessed [*kammaniye thite*] for the higher purpose of acquiring the necessary liberating wisdom or *paññā* [= *ñāṇa*]. The outcome of this we would call **Personal Experience in Buddhism at its highest.**

This power to uplift the humans to transcendental heights has to be personally and individually developed from within. It is viewed as being intellectually produced [implied by the Pali words *paññā* and *ñāṇa*]. It is generated by a process of psychic or mental growth: it is a process of mind culture [severally referred to in Pali as *adhicitta-sikkhā*, *citta-bhāvanā* or *samādhī*]. It is very categorically stated that this wisdom for which we use, for want of any better description, the phrase 'intellectual product' is not the outcome of mere logical argument [*atakkāvacaro*].

It is therefore delightful to find in the Buddhist way to salvation which is called the Noble Eight fold Way [Pali: *Ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*] the very first rung of the ladder turning out to be 'corrected vision' [*sammā-dīṭṭhī*]. We choose to translate the term as **corrected vision**. We think, and that for several reasons, that this rendering is more precise than **correct vision**. Buddhist texts insist that this corrected vision is acquired through 'instruction from others' [*parato ghoso*] and personal reflection [*yoniso ca manasikāro*. M. I.294]. It is also to be noted that this marks the preparation of the ground for the sowing of the seeds of intellectual growth. It is not to be mistaken for the grand finale of perfected wisdom or *paññā*. It is only preparatory or *pubbaṅgamā* and heralds the process of spiritual journeying. It is not the final product of the Path and certainly does not come as the last item on the list.

The primary introduction and initiation into the creed being thus completed, the Buddhist disciple hereafter needs to take upon himself or herself the personalisation of these in his or her own life. One has to actuate them or turn

them into realities in one's own life. This very vital point in the process of religious living is vividly expressed by the Buddha himself in his first sermon, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta [S.V.422 ; Vin.I. 11] where he tells his first five disciples that his claim to Buddhahood is entirely dependent on this achievement. The first truth of *dukkha* had to be personally known [*pariññeyyaṃ*]. It was not to merely exist by itself. With effort and with perseverance, he did gain mastery over it [*pariññātaṃ*]. The awareness of it had to be part of one's personal experience. The second truth that craving is the cause of *dukkha* was going to be meaningful only if one endeavoured to totally reject it within oneself [*pahātabbaṃ*]. Likewise, *nirodha* or Nibbana had to be achieved [*sacchikātabbaṃ*] and the way or *magga* had to be developed [*bhāvetabbaṃ*]. All of this meant that for attainment of release the necessary life changes, changes of attitudes and aspirations, had to be brought about. That was the Buddha's own admission. [f.n. 3. 'As long as O monks, I had not developed a keen insight and thereby gained mastery with regard to these Four Noble Truths in their triplicate development and twelve fold comprehensiveness (*tiparivaṭṭaṃ dvādasākāraṃ*), never did I claim that I was the Fully Enlightened Buddha.' Vin. I. 11].

The liberation process in Buddhism thus clearly transpires to be one of personal exemplification. It culminates in a personal accomplishment of the highest order. In the life of a single person, it may only be a single segment that towers over and above the rest. But an overall change within oneself does necessarily take place. The total release from all ills of existence [*sabba-dukkhā pamuccati*] which results in the attainment of Nibbana is what one can achieve in one's own life time [*ditṭh ' eva dhamme*], in this very existence. Everyone who makes it is fully aware of his or her own success. Such a one knows that one's painful samsaric life process of recurrent birth [*dukkhā jāti punappunaṃ*] is ended [*khīṇā jāti*] and that there is no further possibility of rebirth [*khīṇā jāti ... nāparaṃ itthatt y ' ti pajānāti*]. With one's normal mortal framework of a body and a mind [*nāma-rūpa* and *viññāṇa*] one experiences this bliss of release here and now [*vimuttasmim vimuttam iti ñāṇaṃ hoti*].

This final release in Buddhism, we incline to believe, is the product of the total maturing of the phase of religious growth which is named wisdom culture [*adhi-paññā-sikkhā*]. Hence it is called 'wisdom release' [*paññā-vimutti*]. It naturally comes in the wake of preceding moral upgrading [*adhi-sīla-sikkhā*] which is highly socio-religious in character. In Buddhism, this phase of training called *sīla* is basically regulative of social misdemeanors like disrespect for life and dispossessing others of their legitimately earned assets as well as the behavioral impropriety of the sexes. This is followed by the nurture of mind development or psychological self-possession [*adhi-citta-sikkhā*]. Undoubtedly these are invariable relays on the track of Buddhist spiritual training which cannot in any way be dispensed with or for which adequate substitutes can be found. The total explosion or eradication of all defilements of the mundane level [*āsavā parikkhīṇā hontī*] which precedes the attainment of final release is well and truly triggered off by wisdom [*paññāya c'assa disvā āsavā parikkhīṇā hontī* .M.I.160].

By now it should be abundantly clear that in the Buddhist tradition, personal release is attained individually, by each one and for oneself. This certainly is personal experience which a Buddhist disciple partakes of at two successive levels of *samādhi* [mind-culture] and *paññā* [wisdom-culture]. In spite of this highly emphasized personal and individual character of release or salvation in Buddhism, it must be remembered that it has a uniformly common character, in that its dominant character being the absence of all worldly ills. Nibbana is beyond the world: it is *lokuttara*.

But an analytical study of the lives of the saints as well as the would-be-saints in Buddhist history would be one of absorbing interest. They reflect different points of emphasis and interest which are of a personal nature. It is recorded that the Buddha himself showed a keen interest in nature. This very naturally transmitted into the lives of the disciples an intense love of nature and led them to discover in it a tremendous source of inspiration.

A monk by the name of Ekavihariya recollects with joy the words of the Buddha, speaking in praise of life in the wilderness. " Let me alone to the forest

resort, the place much praised by the Buddha " [*Handa eko gamissāmi araññaṃ Buddha-vaṇṇitaṃ*. Theragatha v. 538]. " To the self-composed lone dweller, it provides great comfort " [*Phāsum ekavihārissa pahitattassa bhikkhuno*. loc.cit.]. " Such jungle infested with wild elephants is truly delightful and gives joy to the spiritually ardent " [*Yogi-pītikaraṃ rammaṃ matta-kuñjarasevitaṃ*. Ibid. v. 539]. This kind of vision has contributed, on the one hand, to the acceleration of the salvation process. Listen to what he gleefully says: " As the cool breeze gently blows past me and I detect therein a sweet aroma " [*Mālute upavāyante sīte surabhigandhake*. Ibid. v. 544], this is the time for me " perched on a rock on the mountain above to tear asunder the veil of ignorance " [*Avijjaṃ dālayissāmi nisinno nagamuddhani*. loc.cit.]. These are declared to be innocent attractions. They should never be allowed to be a source of distraction. " In things of beauty, there exists no evil in themselves " [*Na te kāmā yāni citrāni loke*. S. I. 22]. " It is human thinking that makes a world of evil " [*Saṅkappa-rāgo purisassa kāmo*. loc.cit.].

Here is the story of another monk by the name of Usabha [Theragatha. v. 110]. He saw a clump of trees, growing luxuriantly on a yonder cliff [*Nagā nagaggesu susaṃvirūlhā*. Ibid.]. He guessed the only source of moisture for them were the fresh heavenly clouds which drenched them ceaselessly [*udagga-meghena navena-sittā*. Ibid.]. Usabha was himself a great forest-lover and a lover of solitude [*Vivekakāmassa araññaṣaṇṇino*. Ibid.]. These observations were vibrant enough to kindle a spiritually divine spark within him [*Janeti bhiyyo usabhassa kalyataṃ*. Ibid.]. He stepped therefrom into the path of spiritual culture and ere long became an accomplished disciple, an arhant.

Thus we see that in Buddhism, scriptural tradition [*pariyatti*], together with personal apprenticeship or *paṭipatti* brings about personal experience of varying levels. This personal experience, at its highest, i.e. at the intuitively intellectual or wisdom level, it is the highest achievement of *paññā*, the product of a multiple process, the much needed tool of liberation.

Foot notes

f.n.1. ' Through a very long stretch of samsaric existence I ceaselessly searched in vain for the cause of human suffering. Today I have come face to face with thee. O builder of human misfortune, you shall construct no more houses for me. Your entire edifice, I have now demolished. My mind no more involved now with the phenomenal world of living (*visaṅkhāragataṃ cittaṃ*) has reached the very extinction of craving.'

f.n.2. 'All things of the world of phenomenal existence are liable to perish (*Vayadhammā saṅkhārā*). Be ye therefore heedful and accomplish your task (*Appamādena sampādeṭṭha*.) Ere long the Tathagata would pass away ' (*Naciraṃ Tathāgatassa parinibbānam bhavissati*.) D.II.120].

f.n. 3. They are 1. proneness to covetousness or *abhijjhā*, 2. conflicting ill-will or *vyāpāda*, 3. mental drowsiness or *thīnamiddha*, 4. mental agitation and flurry or *uddhacca-kukkuccā* and 5. distrust and doubt or *vicikicchā*.